

**“Who’s there?”
Philosopher or Thespian**

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What, has this thing appeared again tonight?
Hamlet (1.1.21)

Hamlet is a play about the inter-regnum after the king has been murdered. I want to read it as an allegory for our field of studies, based on the unique position both the play and its eponymous hero have acquired in philosophy and in theatre and performance studies.

Hamlet – a student of both in Wittenberg, but not allowed to return to his studies by the new king – is torn between these two discursive practices, employing theatre to solve philosophical-existential issues. Also Shakespeare’s play oscillates between them, through its themes and composition, as well as its numerous puns, ‘performing philosophy’ and ‘philosophizing performance’ in ways that Hamlet himself remains unaware of. Hamlet’s desire to be both philosopher and ‘thespian’ (a person of the theatre) leads to his tragedy, while in Shakespeare’s play the encounter between the two fields becomes highly charged, creating a complex ‘dialogue’ between the dramatic character and the ‘ghost-like’ voices ‘behind’ the text. This complexity has contributed to the exceptional position of *Hamlet* in the Western tradition.

There exists a complex history of encounters between philosophers and thespians, beginning with Socrates’ discussion about the theatre with Agathon and Aristophanes in Plato’s *Symposium*. Both the *Symposium* and *Hamlet* have been of central importance for the many thinkers who have philosophized about the theatre, like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Benjamin, Lacan and Derrida. My discussion will end by reflecting on this remarkable tradition.